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Since the release of Kubrick's *Lolita* in 1962 and the publication of Alfred Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* in 1974, "Nabokov and Cinema" and, more narrowly, "*Lolita* and Cinema," have been common topics in both Nabokov scholarship and in teaching Nabokov courses. My interest, however, is in Nabokov and a different kind of cinema, about which very little has yet been said or written in relation to Nabokov to date. It is the pre-revolutionary Russian cinema, and, in particular, Evgenii Bauer (1865-1917), the most popular and prolific director of Nabokov's youth, who made more than eighty films (many of which did not survive) in less than five years, from 1913 until his sudden death between the two revolutions of 1917. These days, given students, as well as my own, increasing interest in film, I teach early Russian and Soviet cinema pretty much every year. I never fail to mention to those who are familiar with Nabokov how often Nabokov's oeuvre, including *Lolita*, appears to echo Bauer's films. Teaching Nabokov's *Lolita* and Bauer's films side by side furthers the exploration of Nabokov's very deep Russian roots, and demonstrates how crucial his formative experiences with Russian art and culture were not just for his Russian but also his American works. It also brings a new angle into the discussion of cinematographic elements in Nabokov's prose and thus serves as a helpful sequel to "Nabokov's Dark Cinema", as mapped out by Appel.

Since the release of Kubrick's *Lolita* in 1962 and the publication of Alfred Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* in 1974, "Nabokov and Cinema" and, more narrowly, "*Lolita* and Cinema," have been common topics in both Nabokov scholarship and in teaching Nabokov courses. My interest, however, is in Nabokov and a different kind of

cinema, about which very little has yet been said or written in relation to Nabokov to date. It is the pre-revolutionary Russian cinema, and, in particular, Evgenii Bauer (1865-1917), the most popular and prolific director of Nabokov's youth, who made more than eighty films (many of which did not survive) in less than five years–from 1913 until his sudden death while shooting a film in Crimea, between the two revolutions of 1917. Bauer brings a new angle into the discussion of cinematographic elements in Nabokov's prose and thus serves as a helpful "prequel" to Nabokov's "Dark Cinema," as mapped out by Appel.

Nabokov's childhood coincided with the infancy of Russian cinema. The first truly Russian film, *Sten'ka Razin*, made by a Russian director (Vladimir Romashkov) and produced by a Russian studio (Drankov Company) appeared in 1908, when Nabokov was nine years old. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes how, in 1915 and 1916, he and his beloved "Tamara" (Liusia Shulgina) would go to one of the two movie theaters on Nevsky Prospect ("The Parisiana" and "The Piccadilly") during cold winter days when they needed a warm (and conveniently dark) place to be together. They would sit in the last row of seats and though they probably paid scarce attention to the screen, it was still enough to notice that "The art was progressing. Sea waves were tinted a sickly blue and as they rode in and burst into foam against a black, remembered rock… there was a special machine that imitated the sound of the surf, making a kind of washy swish… As often as not, the title of the main picture was a quotation from some popular poem or song and might be quite long-winded… Female stars had low foreheads, magnificent eyebrows, lavishly shaded eyes…" (Nabokov, *Speak Memory* 236).

As you all know, Nabokov cites the experience of watching silent films quite frequently in his early Russian works. Among the better-known examples, there are the oft-cited scene in *Mary*, where Ganin recognizes himself as an extra in a German film (Nabokov, *Mary* 20-1), and Luzhin's emotional reaction to watching his very first movie in *Defense* (Nabokov, *Defense* 191-92). Among less-discussed instances, there is a remarkable poem, "Cinematograph" ("Kinemotagraf"), which Nabokov wrote in 1928 and published in the émigré paper *Rul'* (Rudder; Nov 25). The poem starts with a declaration of love: "I love these circuses of light, increasingly more

hopelessly and more tenderly" ("*Liubliu ia svetovye balagany/vse beznadezhnee i vse nezhnei*"); proceeds to marvel at the magic of the cinematographic deception: "Here is a moon-lit bedroom/just look how this shawl falls on the rug/Without seeing the bright lights on the set/or hearing the voice of the irritated director"; and ends with an abrupt dissolution of the vision: "And here is the end… The invisible piano dies out… the invention melts away…" (Nabokov, *Krug* 105-06; my translation).

It is, therefore, all the more surprising that Nabokov's exposure to early Russian film has, indeed, remained a blind spot in Nabokov studies. In Appel's book, Mozzhukhin does make a brief appearance (as "Mosjoukine," which is the spelling he adopted after leaving Russia) but only in his sole American role, in the 1927 film *Surrender* (Appel, *Dark Cinema* 274). In a recent article, "Nabokov and Cinema," when Barbara Wyllie catalogues possible influences on Nabokov's formative years as an artist, she does not even mention the significance of the first films Nabokov ever watched as a young man growing up in Russia. Instead, we are directed towards pondering the possible impact in later years of "German Expressionist as well as Soviet and European avant-garde film, the epics of Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith, Mack Sennett's slapstick comedies…" (Wylley 221).

While foreign films were very popular among early moviegoers in Russia, by the time Nabokov was old enough to appreciate movies, the First World War had largely put an end to new foreign imports. Instead, it fell to the local talents to produce enough films to support the studios and their theaters, as well as to satisfy the increasing craving for escape that people in war time inevitably develop. That explains the head-spinning number of films that directors like Bauer, Iakov Protazanov (1881-1945), Petr Chardynin (1873-1934), and Vasilii Goncharov (1861-1915) were making during the war years. It was the era of two of Russia's megastars, Vera Kholodnaia (1893-1919) and Ivan Mozzhukhin (1889-1939), the latter described by Nabokov as "[t]he favorite actor of the day… whom Tamara and I had so often admired on the screen…" (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 237, 247). (As you all well remember, young Nabokov also annoyed that very Mozzhukhin when he inadvertently interrupted a film shooting taking place in early 1918 in Crimea, after Bauer's death there a year

earlier. Because of its light, climate and nature, Crimea was the favorite locale for early Russian filmmakers even before the Revolution, just like the Riviera and the South of France were for French painters)

Evgenii Bauer was already in his forties when he started working in film. He graduated from Moscow's Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and, as did many future directors, first made his mark as a set designer, specializing in artistically impeccable and opulent Art Nouveau sets. He worked for Drankov and Pathé studios before he moved in 1913 to Khanzhonkov Production Company, where he became by far the most successful and acclaimed director of the war years. Bauer died in June 1917, after accidentally breaking his leg on a set in Crimea and, while bed-ridden, developing pneumonia. Several months later, with the advent of the Bolshevik revolution, his name and films would become virtually purged, and it has only been in the past 10 years or so that he has begun to receive his due as one of the world's most remarkable directors of that early era.

Among all the directors working at the time, Bauer was probably the closest to young Nabokov's sensibilities and interests. Unlike Goncharov, who often focused exclusively on Russian peasants, or very solidly middle-class Protazanov, Bauer was preoccupied with the upper social crust of St. Petersburg society, the immediate milieu of the Nabokov family. Since Bauer was such an enthusiast of Art Nouveau and his sets and Petersburg scenery, some of which we will see presently, strongly reflect it, he probably on occasion (which I am, however, yet to find in his surviving films but I have not watched them all closely just with this in mind) even used as a backdrop the Nabokovs' family mansion on Morskaya street which was, apparently, the first example of Art Nouveau architectural style in Saint Petersburg. For that reason alone, Bauer's films should be, in my opinion, an obligatory element for anyone who wants to get a sense of what Nabokov was likely to see and be surrounded with in the St. Petersburg of his youth. But beyond this "general interest," there is a significant commonality of themes and even techniques. A supreme artist and a precocious filmmaker, Bauer was firmly rooted in Russian and European Modernism. While many of the films Bauer made are on the surface melodramas similar to other typical cinematographic

staples of the 1910s, they brim with dark psychological twists and turns of the kind that Nabokov was prone to appreciating.

These twists often stemmed from Bauer's preoccupation with the obsessive–and frequently criminal–behavior caused by men's desire to possess, preserve, and immortalize the beauty of the objects of their passion, even if that meant extinguishing their lives first. In *Smert' na zhizn'* (Death for Life; 1914) a husband, played by Mozzhukhin, kills his wife and then keeps her embalmed body in a cellar in order to prevent aging and decay and thus preserve her beauty for eternity. In *Umiraiushchii lebed'* (Dying Swan, 1916), a painter strangles his model, a ballerina who stars in Saint-Saens's "Dying Swan," in order to bring verisimilitude to her pose and thus truly immortalize her art through his. Both films have immediate relevance to *Lolita*, of course. Humbert would also love to prevent aging in his Lo but he has to settle on taking full advantage of Lolita before she "ages." And while he may be responsible just for ruining her life, not her eventual demise, it is that very same "refuge of art" that Humbert, like the painter in *Dying Swan*, offers to both himself and the object of his obsession as "the only immortality" the two of them can share (309).

There are, however, three other Bauer films which I believe are even more evocative of Nabokov. They are *Grezy* (Daydreams, 1915), *Posle smerti* (After Death, 1915), and *Za schast'em* (For Happiness, 1917). The last one features a mother and a daughter — whose name is Li — both in love with the same man. Together with *Dying Swan*, these are the films that came out during the very peak of Nabokov's relationship with Shulgina and, given how much they frequented movie houses at that time and how prominent Bauer was, it is hard to imagine that they would have missed them. Since, like Bauer, the films remain quite obscure, short summaries may be in order.

In *Grezy*, Sergei Nedelin (played by Aleksandr Vyrubov), a very wealthy man, is despondent upon losing his young wife, Elena, until he spots a woman on the street who looks very much like her. He follows the woman into a theater, where she turns out to be an actress performing in Jakob Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (Robert the Devil; 1831). Nedelin is profoundly affected by the scene at the end of Act II where the actress playing a dead nun masquerading as a maiden appears to be rising from her grave. He subsequently woos her and they soon become engaged, upon which he proceeds to make his

fiancée try on his dead wife's dress and hairstyle. While the actress's vulgarity and common ways now and then repel him, Nedelin is obsessed with the desire to re-create his wife in another woman. The tale ends tragically, of course. His fiancée resents being treated as just the dead wife's look-alike, and ridicules Nedelin for being a slave to his wife's memory, which he calls "sacred." In the ultimate gesture of insult, she retrieves Elena's dark braid from a box where Nedelin has preserved it, and, waving it around, mocks him for worshipping the "flea-breeding" hair of a dead woman. Enraged, Nedelin strangles his fiancée with the very braid she was taunting him with.

It is perhaps easy to imagine how both young Nabokov and his "Tamara" felt about such over-the-top melodramatic elements in Bauer when they would take a break from their own immediate love story in progress at the dark movie theater to watch his. And yet any reader well acquainted with Nabokov will immediately recognize several aspects of this film as similar to major themes in his works, most significantly, of course, "The Return of Chorb"(1925) which even has an interesting "hair" motif in it.

And then there is of course the Annabel storyline of *Lolita*. Humbert Humbert is very plainspoken about what it is that he has been trying to do with the memory of Annabel when he declares that he "broke her spell by incarnating her in the other" (15). Prior to the very close match that Lolita afforded him, he had embarked on a series of more (Monique) or less (Marie) successful attempts at incarnation, mostly with prostitutes. Then, like Nedelin, he committed a grave blunder by linking his life with someone who, because of her good "imitation… of a little girl," he deemed as close enough (24, 25). Unlike Nedelin, he never strangled his failed attempt at reincarnation, but he did seriously consider it: "I now wondered if Valechka… was really worth shooting, or strangling, or drowning" (29). Even a faint "hair motif" can likewise be perceived in *Lolita* when Humbert, on his way to Pavor Manor, notes the only physical attribute of Lolita's that has been preserved in the car –"a three-year-old bobby pin of hers in the depths of the glove compartment" (293).

Interestingly enough, Humbert and Bauer may have the same antecedent in structuring their narratives: Edgar Allan Poe. Bauer's indebtedness to Poe is no less obvious than Humbert's. *In Dying Swan*, there is a remarkable scene where the ballerina's prophetic

dream ends in a very Poe-like manner with numerous disembodied white hands all trying to reach her neck. *Daydreams* hark back to Poe's "Ligeia" (1838) both in its theme of the untimely loss of a beautiful young wife and the unsatisfactory experience with "the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia" (Poe 103). Even more striking, though, as the story ends, there is the appearance of "huge masses of long and disheveled hair… blacker than the raven wings… of my lost love–of the lady–of the LADY LIGEIA" (Poe 108),

Bauer's *Posle smerti* (After Death) parallels other aspects of the Lolita/Humbert relationship and, more specifically, the intricate tension between "reality" and perception, which is at the very core of both Nabokov's and Bauer's artistic philosophies. While Lolita is by no means an identical physical replica of Annabel, it hardly matters. "There are two kinds of visual memory," Humbert tells us. "[O]ne when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open… and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face…" (11). There is an echo of the same theme as to which "replica" of the deceased beloved is truer to the woman's essence in *After Death*. Like *Daydreams,* this film too is about the firm grip that the dead hold over the living. Based on Turgenev's story "Klara Milich" (1883; the other title of the story was, in fact, "Posle smerti"), the film follows a young man (Andrei Bagrov, played by Vitold Polonskii), an amateur scientist and photographer, who is still recovering from the death of his mother. Because of that and also because he is painfully shy as well as afraid to be distracted from his scientific pursuits, Andrei spurns the attention of a young actress (Zoia Kadmina, played by Vera Karalli who also stars in the *Dying Swan*) even though he himself is strongly moved by her. When the actress commits suicide as a result of his rejection, Andrei, devastated by both guilt and love, becomes obsessed with trying to recreate her true image. Not satisfied with Zoia's photograph, he attempts to use his science laboratory to instill more life into it by employing a stereoscope and other scientific equipment in order to give it more dimensions. When science fails too, he shuts his eyes and relies, indeed, on the "dark innerside of [his] eyelids" for her to appear to him as a vision. Zoia obliges, and after a series of dreams and visions he dies of heart failure clutching in his

hand–strong glimpses of Poe here as well–a strand of dark hair which, we are led to believe, entered the "real" world from Zoia's apparition.
The third film of particular relevance to *Lolita* is *For Happiness*, Bauer's last completed film most of which was shot in Crimea. Here a mother and a daughter, unbeknownst to each other, find themselves in love with the same man. The daughter, Li, played by a very young and petite Taisiia Borman, is probably supposed to be at least 16 but looks 14 or younger, and would easily fit Humbert's definition of a "nymphet." Her mother (also Zoia, played by Lidiia Koreneva), a very rich widow who lost her husband ten years earlier, is involved in a serious relationship with a successful middle-aged lawyer (Dmitrii Gzhatskii, played by Nikolai Radin), but the two keep postponing making it public and getting engaged because Zoia fears that her Li loved her father too much to accept a new man in her mother's life. The lawyer is therefore determined to make Li like him, and, alas, succeeds only too well. While he and Zoia readily attribute the warmth of Li's feelings to his progress in becoming a father figure, Li ends up rejecting her own suitor and declaring that her heart is given to Dmitrii Gzhatskii without whose love she would die. Fearful that her frail daughter, who is already rapidly losing her sight, would go completely blind or even, die, the mother begs her lover to marry Li. When he refuses and announces to Li that he is in love with her mother, the girl indeed enters the world of physical and emotional darkness. This is, of course, a reversal of the *Lolita* situation, but Li and Lo could well be at least distant artistic relatives.
To end this talk on a practical note, due to the efforts of Yuri Tsivian, a great enthusiast of early Russian Silent film, most of Bauer is now available either on VHS or DVD. As far as I am concerned, he is a must see for all Nabokovians!

Filmographie

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